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The hotline

A Mainer in the middle

JERE PAGE from Dexter is one of the few Americans who has regularly "talked" to the Kremlin from the White House over the "hotline," the super-secret communications link between the president of the United States and his counterpart in the Soviet Union, used in times of world crisis.

Page, the son of a schoolteacher and a foundry worker, spent years inside the White House as a Russian translator. He handled hotline traffic between President Nixon and the late Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev. He translated the hotline message from Brezhnev which was so threatening that after Nixon read it the president put American forces on "brink of war" alert.

Page went to Moscow for the Nixon-Brezhnev summit meeting; carried the CIA messages to former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's apartment inside the Kremlin; rode on Brezhnev's plane to Yalta; and sometimes carried the famous "black box" which goes everywhere with the president and is called "the football" by White House staffers.

Page came to talk to me recently about his years inside the White House. But before he could talk with a journalist, Page had to get clearance both from the FBI and the White House Communications Agency, for which he worked, even though he had left years ago.

I asked Page how the boy who had flunked French in Dexter high school got to be a Russian translator inside the White House by the time he was 25 years old.

"THE ARMY," HE answered. "When I was graduating from the University of Maine, I was given a very low draft number—11—so I enlisted and got a chance to go to the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, Calif."

Page studied Spanish for a year, then was sent back to his parachute outfit at Fort Bragg. "I got tired of washing trucks in the motor pool and grabbed a chance to go back to Monterey and this time spent a year studying Russian."

The Defense Institute Language school is the biggest in the world, with over 3,000 students. It teaches every language in the world. They worked Page hard—eight hours a day in class, plus four hours homework for 48 weeks.

Halfway through the course, Page had a grade of 95 percent and was asked if he'd like to join the White House Communications Agency as a translator. When he said yes, he had to take another three hours a day of one-on-one instruction from a White House staffer.

When Page reported for duty at the White House in October 1973, he was in Army uniform. "Right off, they gave me a check for \$500 and told me to buy three civilian suits. I seldom wore a uniform."

HE RECALLS HIS first night on duty vividly.

"It was the height of the Yom Kippur war between Israel and Egypt. Our office was in the old bomb shelter built in Truman's time, in the basement of the east wing of the White House, down two flights, through three concrete doors on hydraulic hinges with locks which had to be opened by ciphers, which changed daily.

"They showed me the hotline and the encoding equipment, a black box 18 inches high, six inches wide. And then my new boss left me, to go to dinner. I was alone.

"A general came down from upstairs to tell me to be ready to transmit a message from the president. I sweated, because I didn't know how to use that black box to encode the president's message to Moscow. I waited. Nothing happened.

"But the next night, at 6.30 p.m., Moscow came on the line saying a message from Brezhnev for Nixon was coming through. It seemed half the White House staff heard about it and they crowded behind me, leaning over my shoulder as Brezhnev's message began.

"What does he say? What's the message?" they kept asking. It turned out to be a simple three-paragraph message for the president simply

signed 'Brezhnev'. He simply said he wanted to keep a dialogue open with the U.S. during this Mideast crisis.

"Three days later came another message from Brezhnev. Even as I began translating it, I knew it was tough and very belligerent. As soon as President Nixon read it, he put our forces around the world on a 'ready-for-war' alert. We had one more message from Brezhnev. After that it was silence."

But every two hours, Page or others on hotline duty would check the hotline link by sending and receiving messages with their counterparts in the Kremlin. "Usually we sent corny quotations from the classics." But Page received all traffic between Nixon and Kissinger when either was flying on Air Force One.

PAGE FLEW TO Moscow in advance of Nixon and Kissinger for the summit meetings. "After they arrived my job was to handle the Kissinger-CIA traffic. Soon after HAK (as Kissinger was called in cables) arrived, I had to carry a briefcase of messages, padlocked to my wrist, to his Kremlin apartment.

"When I arrived, Kissinger was drinking vodka and relaxing with his staff. Diane Sawyer, who worked for the White House Press Office at that time, was sitting on his lap. I was a naive country boy from Dexter, Maine, and was shocked ... spilled most of the papers trying to unlock the padlock. He reached around Diane Sawyer and scrawled a big 'K' on the papers without reading them and told me to send them out."

When Brezhnev flew Nixon from Moscow to Yalta on the Black Sea, Page was lucky enough to ride with them on Brezhnev's plane. "Nixon was glum and limping from phlebitis. He leaned on Brezhnev's arm getting to the plane. I almost made a bad mistake by heading to the front of the plane. On Air Force One, we peons sit in the front and the VIPs in the tail section. But on Brezhnev's plane it was the opposite."